MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO

LENIN AND the STOVE MENDER

and Other Stories

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THE GLASS JUG

When Lenin was eight he had a little adventure that many years later his eldest sister Anna liked to recall.

Anna used to call her brother a little imp; but he was always a very truthful little boy. He never told fibs and always owned up if he had done something wrong.

One day he had the following adventure.

With his father and sisters little Volodya journeyed to the big city of Kazan. They were all going on a visit to their Auntie Anya, who had a house there.

Auntie Anya had children too: Lenin's cousins.

It was a happy time. The children had lots of fun running around and playing games.

In the middle of one game they knocked over a glass jug that had been standing on a side table. They had been having such fun, running helter-skelter through the house. And Volodya, dashing about a room, bumped into the table; the table wob-

bled, and the elegant crystal jug fell to the floor and smashed to pieces.

The children did not even notice who exactly had smashed the jug. Everyone had been running about and chasing one another round the room. Only when the glass jug broke did they calm down.

All of a sudden the door opened and in came Auntie Anya.

She had heard the noise and crash and come to see what was up.

"Now then, children," she said, seeing the broken jug upon the floor, "which of you broke the jug?"

And all the boys and girls began to assure her it was not them.

And little Volodya said the same.

So timidly did he say it that his words were hardly audible.

He had told a fib, so scared was he in that first moment. It was, after all, someone else's house, someone else's room, and Auntie Anya was unfamiliar. What's more, he was the smallest of them all. He just couldn't bring himself to own up.

Then Auntie Anya said,

"In that case the glass jug must have smashed all by itself. It probably got tired of standing on the table, so it jumped on to the floor."

The children all perked up, one of them saying,

"Yes, it wanted to run about with us. That's why it jumped down from the table. But the poor little thing forgot it was made of glass and broke."

And they all burst out laughing.

Only little Volodya did not laugh. He went to another room and sat by the window. He sat there for quite a while lost in thought. It was not until evening that he began to play with the other children again.

Two months passed.

They had left Kazan some time ago and were now living back in their home town of Simbirsk.

One evening, as the children were getting ready for bed, their mother was just about to tuck Volodya in when she noticed him crying bitterly.

"What are you crying for?" she asked.

Through his tears the little boy told her his troubles:

"Mama, when we were in Kazan I told Auntie Anya a fib. I said it wasn't me who broke the jug, but it was."

His mother tried to cheer him up.

"Never mind. Don't cry. I'll write Aunt Anya a letter. And she'll surely forgive you."

"Oh please, Mama, write Auntie Anya a letter right away," the little boy said between his sobs. "Tell her it was me who broke the jug."

His mother did her best to calm him. And after a while he stopped crying and fell asleep.

With a kiss his mother tucked in her little son, thinking to herself,

"What a funny little lad: for two months that has been on his mind and for two months he has worried himself sick for telling a little white lie. But now he's owned up, his conscience is clear, and he's even got a smile on his lips."

Next day Mother wrote Auntie Anya a letter. And in next to no time they got a letter back saying Auntie Anya was not the slightest bit cross with her dear nephew; and she was so looking forward to his next visit.

HOW LENIN STUDIED

Lenin studied very well, even brilliantly. He was awarded a gold medal on finishing school.

And he most likely would have gone on studying very well at university if he had not unfortunately been expelled for being a revolutionary. That was something the authorities wouldn't tolerate. The tsar, too, didn't let revolutionaries study.

Anyone else in Lenin's place would have given up any thought of getting a university education but Lenin didn't let this happen.

"I'm definitely going to get a degree," he told his mother.

Time was slipping by, however. Two years had already passed since his expulsion.

Lenin finally wrote a petition to the minister in which he asked to be allowed to take all the university exams at one go.

The minister was flabbergasted and wondered, "How can he take all the exams at one go when he hasn't studied at university? Alright, I'll let him have a bash but he won't get through them anyway."

After getting permission, Lenin started swotting hard.

For days on end he pored over his books, reading, writing, learning languages, translating and so on.

In the summer he set up his study in a leafy lime grove in the garden where he planted a table and a bench in the ground and went out every morning to study all by himself until lunchtime.

After a rest and a swim he would go back and swot away for another three or four hours.

And in the evening after a walk and a swim, his family would see him hard at it again, and marvelled at the amount of work he could do. They even began worrying about his health.

But Lenin reassured them by saying, "A person can do an incredible amount of studying and work if he rests properly."

And that's just what Lenin did. He would work for an hour and then relax by doing some exercises, then work for another couple of hours and then sprint to the river for a dip. After a

rest or a walk in the woods, he would go back to his books for another session.

He put up a horizontal bar near his table in the garden and every now and then would do exercises on it.

In fine weather he bathed twice or three times a day.

He was a fantastic swimmer. Everyone marvelled at the way he swam.

An acquaintance of his, recalling the past, said that in Switzerland there was a very dangerous lake in which people were always being drowned.

This lake was very deep and had cold undercurrents and whirlpools but this didn't stop Lenin from swimming fearlessly in it.

This acquaintance once told him that he'd better watch out because people got drowned in it.

"Drowned, you say?" asked Lenin. "Don't worry, *we* won't."

And then he swam out so far that he could hardly be seen.

And so, by swimming, exercising and resting properly, Lenin managed to work a lot and swot for all the exams at one go.

He studied hard like this for nearly two years and managed to get through the whole university course which usually took others four years.

He took all the exams and got a first-class degree.

And all the professors asked him, "How did you do it? After all, you haven't studied at the university and been to our lectures. How on earth did you swot up everything so brilliantly? Surely someone helped you?"

"No, I did it all myself," Lenin replied.

And then the professors were even more astonished and the minister's jaw dropped in wonder.

But the professors and the minister didn't know that, besides having a very high I.Q. and marvellous gifts, Lenin was also very good at working hard. This, however, depended on him getting enough exercise and rest.

And that's why Lenin completed his studies so wonderfully well.

HOW LENIN OUTWITTED THE POLICE

When Lenin was twenty-six years old, he was already a famous revolutionary, and the tsarist authorities were scared stiff of him.

The Tsar ordered him to be put in prison.

And, indeed, Lenin spent fourteen months in gaol.

After that the police packed him off to remote Siberia, where Lenin lived in a village for three whole years.

It really was an out-of-the-way place, miles from anywhere, standing in the taiga woodlands. Nothing exciting ever happened there. There was a little stream running through the village, the Shush, and a little woods where even the trees were sparse.

But Lenin did not lose heart at being exiled to such a backwoods. He did a great deal of work, writing revolutionary books, speaking to the peasants and helping them with advice.

And in his spare time Lenin went hunting with his dog Zhenka, swam and played chess. Incidentally, he carved the chess set himself out of bark. And he had carved the pieces very well, exquisitely even.

Time passed unnoticeably. Lenin's three years were almost up and his exile very nearly over.

So Lenin set to thinking where he would go to take up his revolutionary work.

But shortly before the end of his sentence, police came to the little wooden cottage where he was living.

"We're here to make a thorough search," they said. "And if we find anything banned by the government, you'd better watch out. Instead of freedom, you'll be rotting here in this remote village for at least another three years."

Lenin really did have forbidden booklets and various revolutionary documents. They all lay in his bookcase on the bottom shelf.

With one fat whiskered policeman standing at the door to stop anyone going in or out, the other, a shorter fellow but just as whiskery and fierce, was pacing up and down poking his nose into everything.

He searched the desk, the wardrobe, peered into the stove and even was keen enough to crawl under the bed to see what was there.

After a while he approached the bookcase and said, "What have you got here in the cupboard?"

"Just my books," said Lenin.

"Right, I'll take a look at your books and see what's what," said the policeman brusquely.

He stood in front of the bookcase wondering where he would start–on the top or bottom shelf?

Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, was watching the policeman anxiously, thinking to herself,

"Let's hope he starts with the top shelf. If he does, we should be all right; he'll be tired by the time he gets through and probably won't give more than a cursory glance at the bottom shelf. But if he starts at the bottom we're done for – that's the shelf with the banned books mixed in with others."

Lenin, too, was looking at the policeman thinking the same thoughts.

At that Lenin, a slight smile on his lips at the thought, took a chair and placed it beside the cupboard, saying to the policeman,

"Don't overstretch yourself; stand on the chair as you start to check my books."

The short whiskery policeman was grateful for such consideration and climbed up on the chair. But in standing on the chair it meant he had to begin his search with the top shelf. Which was exactly what Lenin had intended.

Lenin grinned as he watched the policeman.

Krupskaya smiled too, as she saw the policeman do what Lenin wanted.

The policeman meanwhile was rummaging around on the top shelves, reading the titles and leafing through each book and booklet. Time was getting on and there was a goodly number of books to get through. It had taken the policeman all of three hours to check four shelves, and only that.

When he got to the fifth shelf he was no longer as thorough. Especially as the podgy policeman at the door was beginning to huff and puff; he even told his colleague,

"Ah-me, how long's this search going to take? I'm getting tired and want my dinner."

"We'll go and have dinner in a couple of ticks," said the short policeman. "I've just got the bottom shelf left. Well, like-

ly as not there won't be anything there either, since I've found nothing in the rest of the bookcase."

At that the fat policeman said,

"It's obvious he's clean. Let's go and have some grub."

Almost without searching the bottom shelf, the short policeman said to Lenin,

"So we haven't found anything illegal on you. I offer my congratulations."

With those words the police departed.

Once the door had closed, Lenin and his wife began to laugh heartily at how the police had been fooled.

LENIN BUYS A TOY FOR A LITTLE BOY

A Russian revolutionary escaped from tsarist gaol and went into hiding abroad.

He set up home in Switzerland, in the town of Zurich, and got a job with a firm making furniture.

Not long after Lenin arrived in Switzerland.

Now this worker very much wanted to have a look at Lenin whom he'd heard so much about and whose books he had read.

One day the worker heard that Lenin was due to speak at a meeting in the Russian Workers Club.

And he made up his mind to go and hear Lenin.

Now the worker's wife also worked at the furniture firm. But since she did the evening shift her husband had no one to leave his little son Donat with.

So he told his son,

"Why don't you come along with me to the meeting and have a look at Lenin?"

Taking his son by the hand he led him off to the workers club.

They arrived at the club fairly early; there was nobody about save a man sitting in the hall reading a paper.

So the worker sat his son down by the window and paced about the hall nervously, wondering whether Lenin would come or not.

At that moment the man with the newspaper (it was actually Lenin) spoke up,

"Such fine weather and here you are keeping your little son cooped up in a stuffy room. Why don't you let him run around the yard?"

"No, my boy Donat is only a nipper," he replied. "It won't be any fun playing all by himself in the yard, and I'm scared he'll wander off into the street and get lost. We're better off sitting here waiting for Lenin."

At that Lenin said to the boy,

"Now, sonny, take my hand and you and I will go for a walk."

So Lenin took the little lad by the hand and they went outside. After walking for a while they came to a toyshop. And in they went.

"Would you like a little boat?" asked Lenin.

It was a really smashing little boat. With sails. And the sails went up and down. There was even a tiny sailor alongside the sails; and it had some tiny fitted seats, a little wheel and flag. It really was a lovely toy.

How delighted the little boy was! Lenin bought the boat and gave it to him.

In no time at all they were back in the yard with the boat. And there, in the centre of the yard stood a quaint old well, just like a miniature lake.

It was there that the little boy began to sail his brand new sailing ship.

The wind billowed out the sails and the little boat sailed grandly across the water steered by its wheel.

The boy was so pleased, he laughed and clapped his hands in joy, shouting,

"Hold hard there, sailorman. Ship ahoy."

That brought a smile to Lenin's face as he stood at the well.

In the meantime the boy's father was pacing up and down the hall, getting more and more nervous.

"Now there's a fine thing," he was thinking. "Lenin's not here yet and added to that some stranger has gone off with my son."

By now a lot of people had gathered in the hall, all asking one another where Lenin was and whether he would be coming.

Just at that moment someone looked out of the window and called,

"I can see Lenin in the yard with a little boy."

At that they all stood up to take a look. The boy's father, too, looked and saw his son with Lenin beside the well.

No words could describe his astonishment.

"Well I'm blowed," he thought to himself. "So that's Lenin. And here's me thinking it was someone else; he was so simple and kindly. He's even bought my son a toy."

It was not long before Lenin returned to the hall and began to talk to the workers.

SMOKED FISH

Lenin was once working in his study in the Kremlin. A glass of tea stood on his desk, a dry rusk in a saucer.

It was the time of the dreadful famine (1919-20). And folk made do with what they could get: oats and potato peelings–if they were lucky.

All the bread they got was one small slice a day; that was the ration.

Of course, comrade Lenin could have had the best food going. But he never permitted that. How could he live in luxury when the whole country was starving? So he never even took sugar with his tea.

Here he was working away and having breakfast as he worked: tea and a dry rusk.

All of a sudden the door opened and his secretary entered

"You have a visitor," he said. "The head of fishing has arrived from Petrograd* and wants to see you urgently."

"Well, show him in," said Lenin.

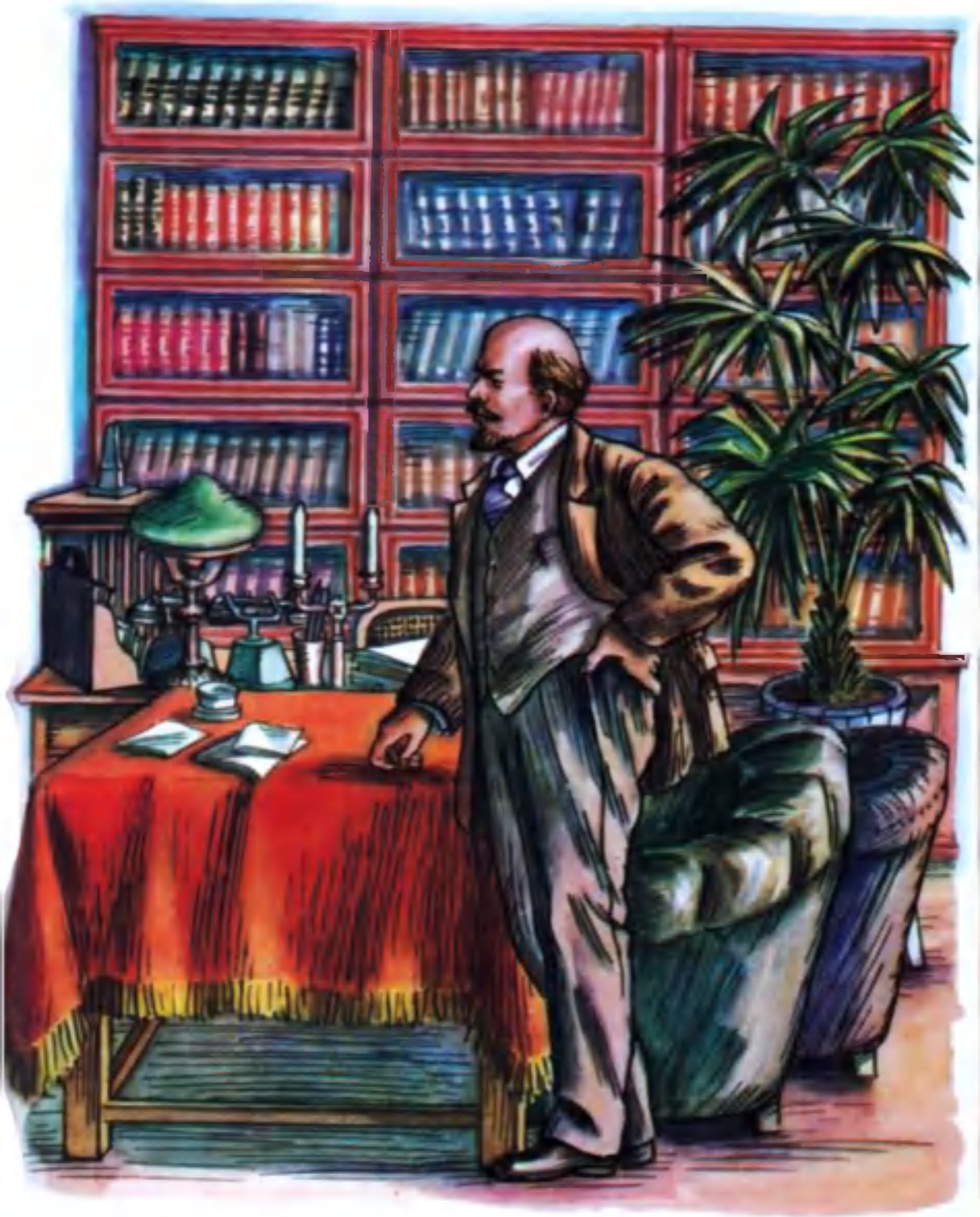
And in came the fisheries chief.

He was a simple fisherman. The Revolution had given him the important job of improving the fishing industry. And now, with his duties at heart, he had come to Lenin to explain why the fish catch was going badly. They needed money to mend their boats and buy new nets. Otherwise the fish would not sit around waiting for Soviet nets, they would swim off to British waters.

So the head of fishing explained why fish was scarce. He was standing by Lenin's desk, refusing to sit down. Although Lenin had twice beckoned him to a chair, he stood there fidgeting.

The reason he could not sit down was that he was holding a

* Petrograd was the old name for Leningrad.



huge parcel behind his back. And in the parcel was a smoked fish. It was a present for Lenin.

The man had smoked the fish himself and specially brought it to Moscow as a present for Lenin.

Of course, he had intended to hand over the fish at once, the moment he entered the study. That's why he held the parcel behind his back to surprise Lenin with his unexpected gift.

He had even prepared a little speech to give as he presented the gift: "Here you are, this is for you, dear Vladimir Ilyich. A small bit of smoked fish. I hope you enjoy it. It will do you good."

But when the fisherman had entered the study he lost his nerve, swallowed his tongue and all the prepared words jumped out of his head; so he decided to offer the fish after the business talk.

For that reason the parcel stayed behind his back.

So there he was standing awkwardly before Lenin, the smoked fish behind him, explaining why the fish catch was poor.

"We'll give you money," Lenin said. "And we'll grant all your requests. Then you catch more fish, I beg you, to ease the hunger among our people."

The time came for the man to go. So summoning up his courage, he laid his fish down on the desk, saying,

"Here, that's for you, Vladimir Ilyich ... we caught a little bit of fish... Smoked it best we could..."

And he broke off when he saw Lenin extremely put out. He was even frowning crossly.

The fisherman was even more confused.

"Be so kind, Vladimir Ilyich... Accept our gift..." he said.

But Lenin did not touch the fish. He said curtly,

"Thank you, comrade, but I cannot accept your fish. We

have children starving in Russia. You shouldn't have brought it."

The fisherman was painfully embarrassed.

"Try it, Vladimir Ilyich," he mumbled. "An exceptionally tasty fish... Just caught it in the sea, you know..."

Suddenly the fisherman saw Lenin reach for the buzzer.

"Oh dear," he thought, "I've gone and done it now."

A secretary appeared at Lenin's ring.

"Right," said Lenin, "take this fish and send it to an orphanage."

Seeing the poor fisherman in a cold sweat, Lenin offered him his hand, saying,

"Thank you for your present, comrade, on the children's behalf."

LENIN AND THE STOVE-MENDER

Lenin was once walking in the woods when he came upon a man cutting wood.

The wood-cutter was Nikolai Benderin, an old fellow with a big bushy beard. And bad-tempered.

He was a stove-mender by trade, though, truth to tell, he was a Jack of all trades. His cart had broken down and he was in the woods to cut wood to mend it with.

As he was about his work he suddenly heard someone approach.

"Hello there," called a voice.

Benderin glanced round. And who should be standing there but Lenin. Of course Benderin did not know that. So he made

no reply. He just nodded his head curtly, as if to say "Good-day to you, fellow, and leave me be."

"Why are you cutting wood?" asked Lenin. "This is a public wood, you can't cut wood here."

At that Benderin gave a surely response,

"I'll do what I like. The wood's to mend cart with."

Lenin said nothing and walked on.

Some time later, a month or so, Lenin came across the stove-mender again. On this occasion Lenin was walking across a field. Feeling tired, he had sat on the grass to rest.

All at once the stove-mender appeared and yelled crossly at Lenin,

"What are you doing sitting there squashing the grass? Don't you know how much hay costs these days? Just you get off of it."

Lenin rose and made for home.

But on this occasion Lenin's sister was with him. And she held back to talk to the stove-mender,

"Why do you yell so rudely? Don't you know that's Lenin, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars?"

What a fright Benderin got. Saying nothing, he hurried home.

Once there he told his wife all about it,

"Oh dearie me, Catherine, I'm for it now. That's the second time I bumped into the fellow and spoke roughly to him; and it turns out to be Lenin, our Prime Minister. What I'm to do, I just don't know."

Time passed, a couple of months, and winter was just round the corner.

Lenin needed a stove-mender. His fire was smoking badly and had to be put right.

There was only one stove-mender in the countryside around, and that was Benderin.

So two soldiers appeared on Benderin's doorstep.

"Are you the stove-mender?" they asked.

Benderin's face fell.

"That's me," he said. "I'm Benderin the stove-mender."

"Right, get your coat," said the soldiers. "You're coming with us to Lenin's place at Gorki.'

Benderin was scared out of his wits. And his face fell even more.

He pulled on his coat, hands shaking.

"Well, that's it, cheerio, Catherine," he told his wife. "We'll likely never see each other again. No doubt Lenin's remembered my rudeness–how I was cheeky to him in the field and that business with the wood. Just as likely he's totted it all up and decided to sling me in gaol."

So off went the stove-mender with the soldiers to Gorki. Once there he was led into a room and Lenin rose from his armchair to meet him.

"Ah, my old friend," said Lenin. "I remember you all right: how you gave me a piece of your mind in the meadow, and how you were sawing that wood."

Benderin was all of a tremble when he heard that. There was Lenin standing before him, and all he could do was twiddle his cap and mumble,

"Please excuse an old fool."

But Lenin said,

"Never mind, I've forgotten about it. As far as the grass went you were certainly right. I had no business sitting in the meadow crushing the grass. That's not why I wanted you. I wonder if you, dear comrade Benderin, could do me a small favour? My fire's smoking badly and I need it put right. Can you do it?"

When Benderin heard these cheery words he quite lost the power of speech, so happy was he.

All he could do was nod his head, as if to say, "Certainly I'll put it right." And motioning with his hands he indicated that he needed brick and clay.

Straightaway brick and clay were brought and Benderin started work. It was not long before the stove was as good as new, if not better.

Thereupon Lenin reappeared to thank the stove-mender. Handing him the money he earned he invited Benderin to take tea with him.

So there was stove-mender Benderin sitting at the table with Lenin having tea and biscuits. All the while Lenin was chatting amiably with him.

Having finished his tea Benderin said goodbye and returned home in quite a different frame of mind.

No sooner had he got home than he blurted out the news to his wife,

"It's me again, Catherine. And here was I thinking we'd never see each other any more. What a surprise. That Lenin is such a fair fellow that I just don't know what to think of him now."

HUNTING

Lenin was very fond of hunting. He would go stalking duck, wood grouse, hare and wolf.

But he also liked hunting fox.

Foxes are cunning animals. So it is all the more thrilling to hunt them.

Foxes have the habit of going to earth. But being clever they don't dig the hole themselves: once they see some ready hole that, say, a badger has dug for himself, they pop in and make themselves at home.

When badger comes along, well I never, he finds someone living in his house.

Poor old badger, of course, gets the shock of his life when he sees a fox peering at him out of his own home. And he

thinks there must be a mistake, and the fox will soon leave.

But not fox. She sits in the earth eyes closed as if she couldn't care less.

At that badger crawls into his house, thinking at worst he'll have to put up with this long-tailed ginger lodger and share with her.

But it's no fun living with fox: she's a thief. She steals all the food as well as taking the best place in the house. Poor old badger has to sleep with his tail sticking out of the hole. And that's no fun at all. Any big animal could come along and take a bite out of his tail. And when it rains...

So then badger troops off gloomily somewhere else and digs himself another hole, thank goodness he has a long nose.

Fox is glad and happy that badger has departed and settles down cosily in her new house.

But then along come the hounds who sniff out the earth and chase the foxes out. They start howling, digging up the soil or snow until fox darts like a shot out of the earth in fear. Off race the hounds in pursuit, chasing her towards the huntsmen. And when they see her the huntsmen open fire, but sometimes miss their mark because fox is a slippery customer. One moment she's here, the next she's there; and when you whip round you see her brush darting behind the trees. Before you know it she's given you the slip, and the trail is cold.

One time Moscow hunters were arranging a fox hunt. It was all done very expertly. They had even put down markers in the snow of the glade to show each man's territory and who was to shoot where if the fox darted from the woods in flight from the hounds.

So the huntsmen spread out.

And Lenin was shown his shooting mark. Dressed in duffle

coat and big felt boots he stood upon a path, rifle at the ready, beside a tree.

All of a sudden, the hounds began to bay excitedly from the woods. That was the signal: they'd located the fox and would soon drive her out into the glade.

The huntsmen held their breath.

Lenin too.

He took a quick look to make sure he'd loaded his gun properly.

All around the beauty was breathtaking. Glade. Forest. Glittering, fluffy snow on the branches. A wintry sunshine gilded the treetops.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, the fox came bounding from the wood straight as an arrow; right at Lenin.

She was a fine ruddy-coloured beast with huge fluffy tail.

She was almost red all over with just a black bob on the very tip of her tail.

In her flight from the hounds she dashed straight into the glade where she was brought up short by the sight of a man with a gun.

For a few seconds the fox froze like a statue; only her tail bobbed nervously. From fright her round little eyes with slit pupils flashed in fright.

She could not fathom what to do or where to run. Dogs behind and a gun in front. That was why she had stopped dead in her tracks.

Lenin raised the gun to shoot.

Yet he suddenly dropped his arm and leant the gun in the snow by his legs.

With a swish of her bushy tail the fox flew off to one side and was soon out of sight beyond the trees.

Over by a tree near Lenin was his wife, Nadezhda Konstantinovna.

"Why on earth didn't you shoot?" she asked in surprise.

With a smile Lenin said,

"I just couldn't, you know. It was such a beautiful fox. I didn't have the heart to kill it. Let it live."

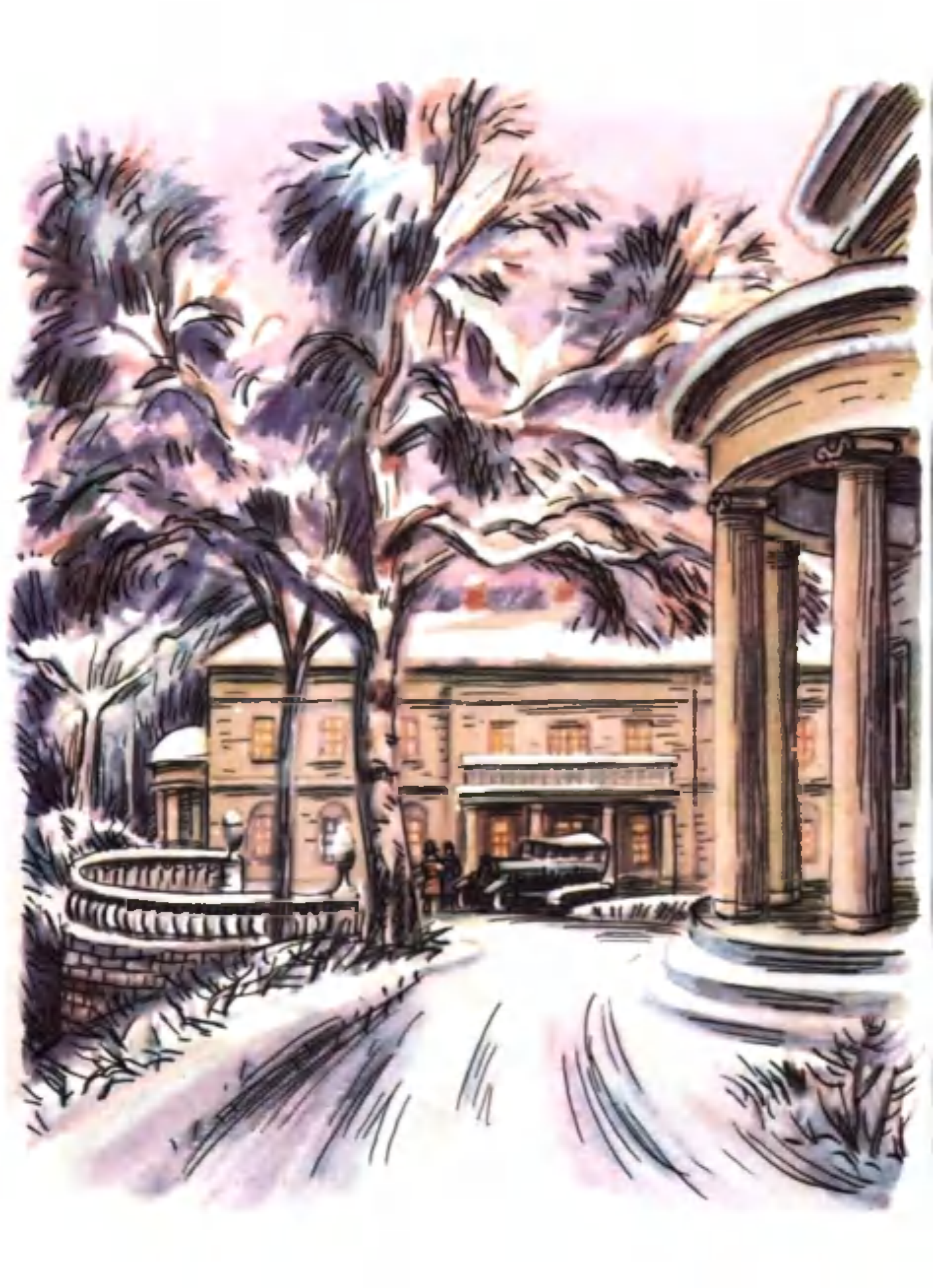
Just then other huntsmen came running up and wondered too why Lenin had not fired when the fox was so close and even a sitting target.

And when they heard why he hadn't fired, the huntsmen were even more puzzled.

One huntsman spoke up,

"The more beautiful the fox, the more valuable it is. I would have had her for sure."

But Lenin said nothing at all.



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М. Зощенко
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